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HOT TIME IN AUSTIN FOR MUSIC GATHERING SHOWCASES THE INDUSTRY'S TRENDS

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They got a double dose of March Madness this year in Austin, Texas. Thousands of diehard college basketball fans invaded the city over the weekend to attend opening-round games of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. Joining them were an equal number of music fanatics, who descended on the Texas state capital for one of the record industry's biggest gatherings - the annual South by Southwest Music and Media Conference.

It's difficult to say which group had more fun or displayed more fan devotion. The streets, hotels, restaurants and nightclubs of Austin were filled all weekend with the sights and sounds of pop music and college hoops. Tatooed rockers wearing nose rings and Doc Martens boots vied for sidewalk space with sports nuts in team ball caps and Nike Air Jordans. Sports bars were crowded with drunken fans rooting for the Texas Longhorns, Syracuse Orangemen and Purdue Boilermakers. Rock clubs were packed with equally inebriated loyalists cheering for the likes of Soul Asylum, the Jayhawks and Elastica. Of course, from a music critic's perspective, South by Southwest was the more interesting party. Started nine years ago by locals interested in promoting Austin's vibrant music scene, the conference has evolved into an impressive international showcase, with hundreds of known and unknown artists performing

and schmoozing with industry and media conventioneers during four days of seminars and concerts. Record companies - from giants such as Sony to the smallest of the independent labels - use South by Southwest to scout talent and promote priority acts to radio programmers and the press. That makes the conference a perfect place to spot trends in popular music and to check out talented unknowns looking for their first big break. This year, the spotlight was on a pair of veteran rock acts from Minneapolis, Minn., both of which used the conference to premiere material from new albums. Soul Asylum, led by vocalist-songwriter Dave Pirner, performed Thursday night at The Terrace, treating a capacity crowd of several thousand to a rocking, hourlong set of new tunes from an upcoming Columbia Records release. The band finished recording the still-untitled album with producer Butch Vig the day before in Los Angeles. The record is scheduled for release in June. If Thursday's set is any indication, it should be one of the year's best rock records, with Pirner and company mixing hard-edged guitar rock with folk, country and blues in tunes such as "Misery," "Eyes of a Child," "Bittersweet Heart" and "Promises Broken." The Jayhawks, fronted by guitarists-vocalists-songwriters Mark Olson and Gary Louris, performed later the same night before a capacity crowd at the Austin Music Hall. The talented, hard-to-categorize band has been compared in the past to such pioneering country-rock performers as The Byrds, Gram Parsons and The Flying Burrito Brothers. But the group's great new album, "Tomorrow the Green Grass" focuses more on pop and rock, with Olson and Louris juxtaposing pretty melodies and sweet harmonies with tough, often biting lyrics. Also premiering new music at South by Southwest was pop singer-songwriter Matthew Sweet, whose 1991 album, "Girlfriend," earned him a national following. His latest work, "100% Fun," is another great collection of catchy pop-rock produced by Brendan O'Brien (of Pearl Jam fame). Sweet performed Thursday evening for a Zoo Records showcase at South by Southwest's big Outdoor Stage in downtown Austin. The new album is a far more rockin' record than "Girlfriend," with Sweet spicing his catchy pop melodies with harder guitar riffs and psychedelic atmospherics. It's too early to talk about another British Invasion, but there's a bevy of hot rock acts coming out of England these days. Among them is Elastica, a talented, '70s-style punk-New Wave quartet that performed a showcase Friday at Liberty Lunch. The band is led by guitarist-vocalist Justine Frischmann, one of the founders of the British group Suede. Elastica released its first U.S. single, "Stutter," last fall on Seattle's Sup Pop Records. A full-length album is due out soon on Geffen Records. Frischmann and her bandmates put a cool, modern spin on influences ranging from the Buzzcocks to Blondie. Definitely one of the bands to watch in '95. A veteran of Cleveland's rock scene also made a big splash at Liberty Lunch on Friday. Former Lucky Pierre frontman Kevin MacMahon performed a spectacular midnight set with his new Los Angeles-based group, Prick, which recently released its debut album on Interscope through Cleveland's Nothing Records. The record, produced by Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor, is a Top 5

hit on the College Music Journal's album charts. MacMahon is a skilled songwriter, guitarist and vocalist who mixes thrashing, industrial-style rock with pop melodies and glam theatrics. Think Nine Inch Nails meets David Bowie meets Alice Cooper. MacMahon writes great songs and is an entertaining live performer. Prick includes former Clevelander Sean Furlong on drums. The group is managed by another Cleveland native, Stuart Sobol. Nothing Records president Tony Ciulla was in Austin to catch the band's Liberty Lunch set. Also in attendance was former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones. CLEVELAND CONNECTIONS: Several other acts with Cleveland connections performed this year at South by Southwest. Coltrane Wreck, an avant-garde rock quintet with a new EP due out in April on Cleveland's Carcrashh Records, had to battle broken guitar strings and a balky sampler, but ended up playing a strong set Friday night at the Electric Lounge Pavilion. Led by vocalist-guitarist-songwriter Tom Jares, the group creates aggressive, uncompromising music that mixes elements of punk, pop, free jazz, classical and heavy metal. Also performing a South by Southwest showcase was tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano, a Euclid native who is now one of the top names in jazz. Lovano's "Tenor Legacy" album was nominated for a Grammy Award this year. He performed Saturday night at Austin's Elephant Room. His new album is "Rush Hour," an orchestral collaboration with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Gunther Schuller. **Mark Addison**, a fixture on the Cleveland rock scene for years as leader of the Generators, played a South by Southwest showcase Friday night at the Ritz Theatre with his new Los Angeles band, The Borrowers. The Borrowers are a talented four-piece acoustic folk group that mixes Addison's beautifully melodic songs with rock attitude and eclectic instrumentation. The group is working on a demo album as part of a joint publishing deal with Crossfire Entertainment and Almo-Irving/Rondor Music. Alternative Press, an influential national music magazine based in Cleveland, used South by Southwest to kick off its 10th anniversary celebration, throwing a big party on Thursday at Emo's.

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